New Orleans States-Item

5 January 1972

ARSON AT RAULT INDICATED

By ANGUS LIND

Final laboratory reports on the fatal November fire at the Rault Center skyscraper "probably will prove the fire was started intentionally," an official report on the blaze said today.

The preliminary report by Fire Supt. Louis J. San Salvador and Ed Robin, the city's chief building inspector, also said unapproved construction on the 15th and 16th floors of the building—including a beauty salon from which five women were forced to jump—probably was responsible for the rapid spread of the Nov. 29 fire which resulted in five deaths. The report was given to Mayor Moon Landrieu and will be followed by later findings, city officials said.

San Salvador said a fire department "life line" was successfully shot through the window the women jumped from but it "was unused for reasons not known to us."

The life line is a one-inch rope fired from a special gun. It is possible to slide down the rope but the rope must first be tied to some strong, stationary object in the area being evacuated.

San Salvador said flames from the burning building finally cut off the upper end of the life line.

Robin's report said plans for the proposed occupancy for the 15th floor "did not indicate any use other than apartments."

He said the violations of the building code "very possibly" contributed to the intensity of the fire. However, Robin said, under the building code the use of the area for a beauty salon would have been permitted.

San Salvador's report concurred with Robin's, saying, "There were many areas of an unapproved [illegible] construction on these floors [illegible] inspection, which is the [illegible] we can account for such a [illegible] spread of the fire."

San Salvador also said lab reports are still being conducted. It was his part of the report that said these tests probably will prove the fire was set.

He said he is assuming "that the fire started in the window area of the Ski-chalet on the 15th floor, burning furiously. It was fed by some flammable liquid type of accelerant, undetected long enough to create a large amount of heat which caused a back draft, or by some as of now undetermined fuel, which blew out the two windows on the Gravier Street side of the 15th floor, allowing heat to enter through the glass area on the 16th floor."

San Salvador said it must be assumed that the breaking of the window in the rear of the building where the five women were located created a draft which brought the fire to them faster.

"We also believe hair spray and other beauty parlor equipment was a contributing factor to fire intensity," San Salvador said.

Richard J. Kernion, chief administrative officer, said the city plans no legal action as yet against owners of the building, but that City Atty. Blake Arata will study the possibilities at the conclusion of the investigation.

Asked if he thinks there is a chance of strong civil action in the case, Kernion said, he feels it is a "strong possibility."

However, Kernion said this report "is not a finger-pointing investigation," but a public service.

Robin said that pending further investigation, he will recommend that the 16th and 17th floor penthouse of the building be demolished. This would relieve some of the load on the bottom floors, he said.

San Salvador's report reiterated what he has been saying all along since the fire, that "no additional amount of personnel or additional equipment, other than a communications system with all officers, and having a helicopter communications directed by the fire department and sprinklers in the hallways, would have changed the situation."

San Salvador said one of the problems faced by firefighters was the loss of elevator service in the building. He said it required much more time for firemen to climb to the 15th floor with their heavy equipment than it would have for them to reach the fire by elevator.

Rault Center Victims Unable To Use Firefighter 'Lifeline'

By ANGUS LIND

The five women who leaped from the fiery 15th floor of the Rault Center Nov. 29 may have had an alternative—a lifeline shot into their window—if they could have used it.

That theory came to light today in a preliminary report issued to Mayor Moon Landrieu from Fire Superintendent Louis San Salvador.

In his report, San Salvador said his firemen "were successful in [illegible] these people which was unused for reasons unknown to us."

Those reasons never may be known, since only one of five women who jumped that day remains alive, still in critical condition in Charity Hospital.

HOWEVER, San Salvador said it is his theory the rope, which entered the same window from which the five eventually jumped, could not be used because the women had no place to tie it.

The aerosol cans in the beauty shop probably began exploding, San Salvador theorized, and the women, panic-stricken, could not find a place to tie the rope.

San Salvador explained the first rope which is shot is "about the width of a venetian blind cord," and is connected to the real lifeline, a one-inch rope, which must be hauled in and connected to something immovable.

He said the idea is for the trapped persons to slide down the rope after it is tied down.

The rapidly intensifying fire multiplied the difficulty factor of the lifeline operation, which already was considerable, he said.

THE ROPE was shot from the roof of the building onto which the women eventually jumped and San Salvador said that a "communication problem" also hampered the rope rescue.

"You've got to shoot over these people's heads," the chief said. "You have to get them back before you can shoot." He said it was nearly impossible to signal the victims from seven stories below.

He said if the missile carrying the rope struck one of the women, she would have been wounded seriously.

When the victims finally were forced to jump, the chief said, "several crews were in reach of these women, in fact as close as 20 feet when the jump took place."

San Salvador said many of the firemen who realized their near success wept after it was over.

"There were many acts of heroism performed by firemen at this fire which, of course, must go unnoticed and unrewarded because of the tragedy that occurred in spite of all Fire Department efforts," he [illegible]